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# A plot made for TV: Who shot the Pope?

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NBC has already made news with its documentary on the shooting of Pope John Paul II—but probably not as much news as you'd expect after seeing this provocative news special.

The fact that there have not been screaming headlines all over the country (or stories on the competing networks) about a Soviet plot to assassinate the Pope tend to cast a little doubt on the startling results of this NBC inquiry.

Or maybe it's just that the story is so convoluted and difficult to sort out.

But there can be no doubt about the impact of the special if it is even remotely close to the truth. It is a disturbing, even shocking revelation about the politics of international terrorism.

"The Man Who Shot the Pope—A Study in Terrorism," which is on Channel 2 at 10 tonight, is a journey through the labyrinthine (one is tempted to say "byzantine," since the geography would be appropriate in this case) world of big-league espionage. It traces the past of Mehmet Ali Agca, a young man whose credentials as a professional terrorist seem irrefutable.

NBC profiles Agca's passage from a small Turkish village, to the University of Ankara, to mingling in international political machinations in Istanbul, to full-fledged terrorist

activity, acted out most overtly in the cold-blooded murder of a liberal Turkish newspaperman.

The best documentation that NBC has is in the area of Agca's finances. They are able to show bank records which record a steady stream of payments, though from no discernible source.

NBC seems to have had a lot of help (the CIA's reaction to these revelations is never mentioned, leading to speculation that it may have had a hand in supplying some of the key information) in following Agca's movement across Turkey and Europe after his escape from the prison where he was being held for the murder. That escape was clearly a part of a well-planned conspiracy.

NBC is able to track Agca through Bulgaria, surely the Soviet Union's most tight-strung puppet, West Germany, Switzerland and finally Italy, where he shot the Pope from the crowd in St. Peter's Square, May 13, 1981.

That Agca was part of some careful plot, and not a wild-eyed religious fanatic as he was first suspected to be, is incontrovertible. His background is clearly established as riddled with terrorist contacts; NBC names a host of possible co-conspirators, and the financial records and Agca's ability to travel undetected through Europe all point to a man with a lot of contacts.

The main questions are: Who was Agca really working for? And what was his motive?

NBC is less successful in its conclusions in these areas. Marvin Kalb, who is the front man for the report (Bill McLaughlin did much of the legwork) says at the outset that matters of international espionage of this sort of complexity are usually impossible to prove. So from the start you know NBC will not prove its case against the Russians. But the evidence NBC does present surely can be labeled intriguing.

Perhaps most volatile is the existence of a letter, which is stated as a matter of fact tonight by Kalb (attributed to the Vatican "envoy" who hand-

delivered it, who refuses to be named) from Pope John Paul to Leonid Brezhnev himself. The letter, said to be hand-written, reportedly had the Pope promising that he would step down from the papacy and stand "shoulder to shoulder" with his countrymen in Poland if the USSR should invade.

The letter arrived at the height of the Solidarity revolution and, according to NBC, caused the Russians to hyperventilate. Fearing the implications, the Russians backed off from invasion and instead pushed the internal crackdown in Poland.

Clearly the Pope can be identified as a thorn to the Soviets. But whether that would inspire plots on his life is left to conjecture, reasonable though that may be.

Certainly there is room for Soviet involvement in the endlessly suspicious movements of Mehmet Ali Agca. His presence in Bulgaria alone makes such an inference easy. But NBC's attempts to link the KGB with the so-called "Turkish mafia" and an obscure right-wing Turkish terrorist group called the Grey Wolves are dense, at best.

They also raise certain questions, such as: Why would a group of right-wing fanatics make deals with the KGB, or vice versa? The answer would be mutual interest, but that is not well-detailed tonight.

Blame that on the multi-layered nature of this sort of plot. As Kalb points out, if the Russians were involved, they could be expected to cover themselves well, with layers of groups and interests between them and their professional assassin.

As Kalb says, it is probable that even Agca didn't know for whom he was really working.

As a documentary, "The Man Who Shot the Pope" is gripping and dramatic, though the drama is laid on much too thick in some spots, especially by McLaughlin. Throughout, the prose is extremely strong, maybe stronger than the available documentation can justify.

That may be one reason for the story to have been less than aggressively received by other major news organizations. (They also have doubts about that papal letter.)